DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 642 HE 024 621

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TITLE Research Issues and Strategies in Regard to the Educational Treatment of the Black Athlete.
PUB DATE Oct 90
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Conference of the Southern Association of Institutional Research and the Society for College and University Planning (Fort Lauderdale, FL, October 11, 1990).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Athletes; Black Achievement; *Black Students; *College Athletics; Higher Education; Research Design; *Research Needs
IDENTIFIERS *Student Athletes

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses research issues and strategies with regard to studying the educational treatment of the black college athlete. The paper begins with an explanation of four intitial premises, after which problem areas are identified indicating that: for athletic students, admissions may be based primarily on athletic promise; in the high visibility sports, student athletes are frequently segregated from the rest of the campus community; responsibility for the academic progress of the student athlete is generally maintained by the athletic staff; pressures to retain academic eligibility for athletics may result in solutions not in the best academic interests of the student; the student athlete may feel that he has more to gain in life by succeeding in athletic competition than by succeeding in academic competition; and blacks are more likely to be admitted for athletic rather than academic promise to traditionally white institutions. The balance of the paper discusses necessary research strategies and research options at the institutional level such as follow-up after the student athlete leaves the institution, studies focusing on individual academic success experiences, etc. Research options at the cross-institutional level are also briefly reviewed. (JB)

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Research Issues and Strategies in Regard to the Educational Treatment of the Black Athlete[1]

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Introductory Premises

It would seem appropriate to preface my remarks with four premises.

First: although black student athletes have some special vulnerabilities, the basic higher education issues, and the need for particular kinds of information to frame educational policy and treatment of the black student athlete, are much the same as those for all student athletes.

Second: educational problems, as manifest by such indices as academic grade averages and graduation, vary markedly by sport, in apparent direct relationship to the revenue potential of the sport for the institution. Numerous studies at the institution or cross-institutional level have found, for example, that grades and graduation rates are equal to or higher than those for the general student body for students in such areas as fencing, tennis, or swimming, while severe academic deficiencies frequently exist for members of the football or basketball teams.

Third, the "special vulnerabilities" for black student athletes have to do mostly with such factors as the higher proportions of blacks from low-income backgrounds, and in residual prejudices that may still abound in the traditionally white institutions and white coaching staffs.

Fourth: although the current climate at the institutional or athletic association levels appears favorable for the direct address and correction

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[1] A paper presented at the 1990 Conference of the Southern Association for Institutional Research and the Society for College and University Planning, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, October 11, 1990, on a panel concerned with "The Education of the Black Athlete."

of any educational deficiencies of student athletes or of institutional deficiencies in their treatment, the climate for research is still highly sensitive and political, with powerful advocates and adversaries ready to attack and vitiate any finding not in agreement with their (frequently subtle and private) agendas.

Tentative Characterization of the Problem Issues

Although there is considerable variation among institutions, some problem-relevant factors may be hypothesized with confidence. These include:

-For highly recruited student athletes, admissions decisions may be based more on athletic promise than on academic promise;

-In the high visibility sports in particular, student athletes are frequently segregated from the rest of the campus community -- in housing, feeding, special support services, etc. -- and, in general, are provided with special protective oversight by the athletic staff;

-The prime responsibility for the academic progress of the student athlete is generally maintained actively by the athletic staff rather than by the academic staff;

-For the successful athlete in the revenue-producing sports in particular, the pressures to retain academic eligibility for athletic competition may result in solutions not in the best academic interests of the student athletes (e.g., strategies employed for successful athletes with marginal academic promise or performance may include steering athletes into special courses or curricula, pressuring faculty to be "reasonable" [lenient], or obtaining special waivers of academic regulations);

(Not so long ago, I taught, as a moonlighting adjunct professor, a course for advanced undergraduates in a prestigious Class 1A institution. A few days after I turned in my grades, I was visited in my off-campus office by a delegation of blazer-clad young men who asked in horrified tones if I realized what I had done. I said no, and one replied "You flunked our Center!" The student in question had never appeared for class, and I had turned in a routine "Withdraw-Failure" as required by the registrar. When

this seemed insufficient cause, I added that he had also provided no term papers nor had sat for the mid-term and final examinations on which grades were based. "We'll get him to you for that," they replied, and they did. I gave his papers careful reading, but could find no justification for any grade but "F". Incidentally, I haven't been invited back to teach at that institution.)

-The student athlete may feel that he or she has more to gain in life by succeeding in athletic competition than by succeeding in academic competition, and that athletic success, while difficult, is more likely than academic success (and this assumption may be correct);

(I recall vividly a research interview in the base year of a longitudinal study of an 8th grade lad of very modest academic potential. I asked him about his career plans, and he confidently replied "major league baseball player." "Do you anticipate any problems in attaining this objective?" I asked. "Yes," he responded -- "I bat crosshanded." "But what about the competition in making it into and through the minors?" I asked. "That will be tough," he responded, "but not as tough as getting into college and becoming a doctor, or something like that." I had to conclude that if I strived for a real empathy, and found myself with more hits than A's and B's, what the boy said seemed reasonable. This logic may explain the otherwise surprising finding in the NCAA Presidents' Commission study of black intercollegiate athletes (Center for the Study of Athletics, 1989) that a significant number who expect to become professional athletes are on the second or third teams of their sport.)

-Special problems for the black student athlete probably reside in current prejudices extant in the majority culture and in cultural differences, but may draw most specifically from the likelihood that blacks are more likely to be admitted for athletic rather than academic promise to traditionally white institutions, and the visibility, to the black student athlete, of the black professional athlete (white students are more likely to have role models who are doctors, lawyers, or scientists). These factors have such consequences as the failure of most college personnel to take the black athlete's academic promise seriously unless he shows special brilliance.

(Where student athletes are segregated with their teammates from the rest of the student body, they may also be segregated from the black student subculture on that campus and its special mechanisms for coping satisfactorily with the academic and social press of the college environment. Black students from many campuses have recently told me: "Here, we have white students, black students, and athletes -- the blacks there are part of the team, not of our group" [Davis and Borders-Patterson, 1986].)

Necessary Research Strategies

Given the extent of the currency of the foregoing "problems" for the student athlete, the great temptation for the researcher is to gather data that would affirm (or refute) their validity on his or her campus. Such may indeed be a necessary precursor to enlist support for change in institutional policy or practices, but it must be realized, as stated at the outset of this presentation, that sensitivities and emotions run high, and that esposure per se is not synonymous with consequential positive action by the intervention agents involved.

I believe that, to be effective, the researcher must be completely dedicated to achieving constructive rather than exploitive findings (the press is better suited for the latter). This may be as simple a matter as searching for reasons for success where it occurs, as opposed to explicating the reasons for failures by the students or the admissions process, or problems arising from the overprotectiveness of the athletic enterprise, for example. Research which exposes reasons for failure may not only be viewed as the delegation of blame, but also generally tells us what we already know.

The research issues are also of a sort that the support and involvement of relevant university officials, particularly the president or chancellor but also of the athletic department staff and faculty or other involved individuals (including student athletes) are essential. This is a matter of including these representatives in defining the research questions, of sensitive listening rather than too-quick stress on how one plans to proceed. While the black athlete may have had a highly significant impact on the desegregation of higher education, the prime reason he and his white counterparts are there may be rooted in such incentives as maintaining alumni support or athletic revenue. To the decisionmakers, these incentives may be more powerful than the desegregation of the institution or the scholastic success of a few undergraduates.

Research Options at the Institutional Level

What, then, are legitimate and potentially productive goals for the researcher

who would hope to facilitate the higher education of the student athlete? Although admissions policy that is blind to required academic competences and reliable indicators thereof may need special study, I suspect the answer is in such simple propositions as effort that would facilitate the student athlete's discovery of a variety of attractive and realistic options for later career involvement; that would support and further mobilize the teaching faculty to take student athletes seriously as students, to discover subtle developmental potentials, and to attract them to active involvement in their academic subject matter; and to help the various involved elements of the institution define their own problems and solutions (which is substantially different from showing the offending group how they have failed their institutional cohorts, and what others feel should be done about it).

At the institutional level, there are some basic housekeeping needs that, if for no other reason, the researcher should pursue for his or her own instruction. Prime among these is the charting of year-to-year trends on such standard indices as preadmissions indices (test scores and high school grade averages), any relevant financial aid data, curriculum, course loads and grade averages, persistence and graduation rates, and (of critical importance for the current purposes), deployment of the student athlete following graduation or leaving the institution. Comparison of trends should examine separately such sub-groups as athletes vs. non-athletes, and, among athletes, subgroups by sport. The focus of this panel would suggest distinguishing between black vs. nonblack student athletes (and students-in-general) as well, but one gets quickly into propositions where the numbers in subgroups of interest may be too small to be meaningful for inter-group comparisons. And, in regard to subgroups formed on the basis of ethnic identity, I read much prior research that suggests that the critical difference when dealing with such indices as those named is not race but socioeconomic class (e.g., when blacks are paired with whites from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, differences in test scores or academic performance disappear [see Davis, 1972]). The findings from the NCAA Presidents' Commission 1987-88 study that student athletes look to their coaches for academic guidance more than to other sources (Center for the Study of Athletics, 1988), and the varability among coaching teams in interest, strategies, and capabilities in this regard, suggest also a useful focus

on the influence the coaching staffs have on their athletes, how they use it, and with what results.

Followup of student athletes after they leave the institution is a critically important area for research. This should involve all athletes rather than just those who made it in professional sports. Michael Jordan has too much visibility for the student athlete who perceives that he or she is progressing on the hard road to glory, and who remembers the first-string center from an earlier team at Mike's institution who became a distinguished physician? The larger record, with its successes outside of participation in professional sports as well as with its failures, could be extremely useful information to have around.

For both predominantly white and black campuses, I suspect that we know too little (and assume too much) about what psychologists call the "phenomenal world" of the student athletes. Our perceptions of the student athlete may be seriously flawed: we simply are not in his Reeboks. The useful remedy has do do with the observer becoming able to perceive how the individual views himself and the world about him to the extent that his perceptions, interpretations, and aspirations are not only clearly recognized, but also understood as to how they may be organized and deemed meaningful by the individual. To achieve this involves probing and listening, with emphasis on the latter. In a number of studies of black students (e.g., Davis and Borders-Patterson, 1986), I have found that as a white researcher I learn more quickly and surely by enlisting the assistance of black students, training them in procedures for the interviews they then conduct, and finally convening them to tell each other what they've learned while I listen as openly as I can to the debate they engage in on their own terms.

Another useful focus at the institutional level is the explication, at the individual or particular program level, of academic success experiences. This may include student attributes, attitudes, and efforts as well as roles and strategies of involved faculty, athletic department staff, support services staff, or others. The history of social research is too much concerned with the revelation and exposition of failure rather than with the understanding of how success is achieved. (Carl Rogers, the eminent

founder of non-directive therapy and mental hygiene scholar, has said that by our focus in mental health on problems we have learned more about how to make a child emotionally ill than how to make the ill child well.) There is much to be learned from the student athletes who perform well academically, graduate, and achieve adult lives that are personally and societally rewarding, in or out of sports.

Research Options at the Cross-Institutional Level

While research at the institutional level is appropriately directed toward understanding individual behavior in a specific and limited environment, and the particular impact of one or more elements in the dynamic interactions that form that environment, research across institutions promises relevance for understanding groups of individuals and the broader institution of higher education. Although research involving historical perspectives (e.g., the work of Ashe and Branch) may be more useful and important in effecting positive change at this, the societal, level, there are some things that institutional/academic behavior researchers should consider.

The approach here need not be so constrained (as in intra-institutional studies) by available numbers, thus permitting comparison of such indices as academic performance for student athletes by different potentially relevant personal characteristics (e.g., race, sex, nature of preparation and performance in high school). There are important variations by sport, and there needs to be special focus on those sports that produce significant revenue for the institution or that offer popular professional careers for the few who make it. Institutional characteristics play an important role -- e.g., such factors as NCAA division and athletic competitiveness, as well as admissions policy for athletes vs. non athletes, attrition rates, athletic/academic emphasis, etc. This is again housekeeping research, directed primarily toward recognizing problems for particular subgroups of individuals or institutions as they develop or occur. And, as in the case of the individual institution, it is critical to find ways of tracking and following up student athletes after they leave higher education.
The research questions that guide these inquiries will probably come not so much from the research community as from pressures exerted upon it from

the broader academic community as well as from outside. There are well-founded rumors about that the forthcoming report of the Knight Commission will be "tough;" or, that the reform package to be presented to the forthcoming January NCAA convention will make it "the reform convention to end all reform conventions." The challenge here may be to keep one's work in response constructive rather than defensive.

And, in the spirit of other basic themes I have tried to make both implicit as well as explicit in this presentation: there are rich and potentially powerful discoveries to be made in focusing on institutions whose student athletes are successful in both academic work and later athletic and non-athletic careers. Most of us are aware of institutions (or athletic programs at particular institutions) where such dual success is high. Why? Given the mutliplicity of factors that operate, I doubt that what happens can be explained simply by a key and unique individual (though the records of some coaches in this regard are known and respected). What we need to know is how the various elements of the institutional community interact to give the student athlete a fair chance at getting and utilizing a higher education.

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